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ABSTRACT

This topical bibliography and commentary highlights the major points of the available literature on the value of using a "thematic organization" for the teaching of language arts classes in grades 6 through 8. It begins with a definition of the thematic organization approach, as culled from the literature. It then presents briefly a few examples of thematic organization techniques that have been used in language arts classes. The topical bibliography and commentary next examines the benefits of the thematic approach. It concludes that thematic organization is a highly effective and valuable technique. Contains 9 references and annotated links to 2 Internet resources. (RS)

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The Value of a Thematic Organization for Language Arts, Grades 6-8

Carl B. Smith, Editor
Darra M. Ellis, Copy Editor

Introduction

The following summary will highlight the major points of the available literature on the value of using a "thematic organization" for the teaching of language arts classes in grades 6 through 8. The summary will start with a definition of the thematic organization approach, as culled from the literature. The summary will then present briefly a few examples of thematic organization techniques that have been used in language arts classes. Finally, the summary will examine the benefits of the thematic approach and give a conclusion based upon the available writers' findings on the subject.

A Definition of "Thematic Organization"

According to Strube (1993), the "thematic" approach to teaching is defined as a style of organizing a curriculum in which students are engaged in in-depth research on a particular topic, issue, person or content-area. The thematic approach stresses the use of reading and writing skills as tools for learning. Brodzick, Macphee and Shanahan (1996) state that an effective thematic organization in language arts makes use of both fiction and non-fiction trade books, and "weaves reading, spelling, writing, math, science, social studies, music and art together while creating learning opportunities for students from meaningful connections across the boundaries" (541). Strube writes that the benefits of the thematic approach include motivation, individualization, exploration of relationships, and encouragement of a life-long learning attitude.

Erwin, Hines and Curtis (1992), state that a successful thematic organization should have the following effects: 1) build knowledge, 2) develop problem solving and other cognitive strategies, and 3) improve self-confidence in the learner.

Johannessen (2002) shared a long-term study which examined curriculum factors that were related to students' achievement in English language arts programs. One of the factors was to include inquiry-based thematic units for students to learn new language arts skills. According to the author, a good inquiry-based thematic unit contains the following key features: a relevant and engaging theme, a strong rationale providing intellectual basis for the unit, key questions governing the exploration, an introductory activity that raises key questions, a continuous sequence of activities and materials, a gateway activity providing a link to prior units, and assessment involving application of consolidated ideas.

Other writers stress the need for a curriculum to be interdisciplinary in its organization in order to be truly thematic. Cook and Martinello (1994) advocate themes developed from students' common interests, which make use of adolescent literature, textbook topics, and current events. In their view, a thematic approach should ideally broaden students' understanding of their world and human experience. Wepner (1992) advocates the use of technology in the classroom to enable a thematic unit to make connections between the disciplines of science, social studies, mathematics, art, and music, in addition to language arts.

Examples of Thematic Organization in Language Arts

The available literature offers two particularly detailed examples of thematic organization in language arts classes. The first is the implementation of a thematic organization in a Scottish Primary II (seven-year-olds) class, as observed by Erwin, Hines, and Curtis (1992). In this class, students received a literature-based thematic unit to teach language arts in concert with science, social studies, mathematics, and art. In this class, the children read an age-appropriate story, then used the plot of this tale as the theme through which they explored other subjects. The students used language arts skills by writing their own summaries of the stories, explored art and social studies by drawing maps of the story's setting, and used math skills by setting up a play store like the one in the story, where the students sold goods with play money. According to the observers, this thematic organization had the effect of instilling in students "an understanding of their own lives, a love or language, and a feeling of satisfaction and pride in their accomplishments" (109). Though this study focuses on the implementation of thematic organization in an elementary class, the authors point out that this organization was adapted from a thematic curriculum which had already been used successfully with middle school-aged students in the Scottish schools.

Smith, Johnson, and Rhodes (1993), observed a seventh-grade language arts class in which the students were given the opportunity to contribute to the development of a thematic-based course of study. The students were given the opportunity to express their common personal and social concerns, and then the teacher adapted these topics into a course based around the theme of death and dying. Students had the opportunity to select adolescent literature that focused on particular subjects within this theme, as well as participate in research groups composed of their peers and report their findings to the class. The result was that students, by exploring their selected topic within the theme, were able to develop reflective thinking, problem-solving, valuing, and self-concepting, while also maintaining a sense of control of their own areas of study.

Advantages of Thematic Organization

The available literature cites a number of advantages to the use of thematic organization in language arts classes.

Erwin, Hines, and Curtis (1992) state that thematic organization of study in the classroom they observed had the effect of allowing students to develop a better understanding of the organization of text, to work cooperatively to solve problems, and to become more self-confident as they related the language of literature to the language of their every day lives.

George (2001) reported the observations of three middle school language arts classrooms in New York City, where teachers created multiple genre thematic units with a variety of texts linked by

themes. In these three classrooms students learned to use literature to explore "big ideas" and to make connections among different genres.

Hewitt and Roos (1990) sum up the advantages of the thematic organization approach by stating, "It has become apparent to us that one of the most rewarding ways to teach is to begin with a thematic idea and then plan ways in which students, books, ideas, and activities may interact" (7).

Schiller (1996) writes about how the use of a thematic unit on immigration in a multi-ethnic middle school classroom had the advantage of increasing interaction and communication between students. By approaching the theme of immigration through students' personal experiences, the teacher was able to engage the students in understanding the linguistic and cultural differences of their classmates.

Brodzick, Macphee and Shanahan (1996), in their review of publications available for use in thematic organization, note that there is currently an abundance of useful products available for thematic instruction in the language arts. The writers state that "skills teaching can receive real emphasis within thematic units; the idea is to connect skills to the more substantive part of the curriculum" (540). The writers go on to state that another advantage of the thematic approach is that it is appropriate for all levels of learning.

Conclusion

An examination of the available literature on the use of thematic organization in language arts classes of grades 6 through 8 suggests that thematic organization is a highly effective and valuable technique. It can be concluded from the writers' observations that the main advantages of the thematic organization of language arts classes are as follows:

- Greater confidence in use of language in every day events
- Increased student engagement with the subject matter
- Improved classroom interaction and student communication
- Improved research and critical inquiry skills
- Enhanced connectivity between ideas in different subjects
- Flexibility in application of the thematic technique to a variety of subjects and learning levels

Internet Resources

* Cross-Curricular Thematic Instruction.
This paper describes cross-curricular thematic instruction that encourages the exploration of important topics, problems, and questions by engaging students in many varied reading and writing opportunities. It presents suggestions for teaching themes that build upon what students know, because such themes increase confidence, improve reading and writing, expand concepts and background, and foster positive attitudes about reading and writing.
http://www.eduplace.com/rdg/res/vogt.html

* Thematic Approach
This article talks about the definition of thematic approach, the procedures for implementation and the research supporting the thematic approach.
http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/step/ep301/Fall2000/Tochonites/theme.html

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